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ABSTRACT

A graduate course that required those enrolled to read an array of texts on composition theory yet left it up to them to stimulate classroom discussion yielded mixed results, according to student evaluations. The texts for the course, including Gary Tate and Edward P. J. Corbett's "Writing Teacher's Sourcebook," Erika Lindemann's "A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers," Tate and Lindemann's "Introduction to Composition Studies," and Patricia Harkin and John Schilb's "Contending with Words: Composition and Rhetoric in a Postmodern Age," were chosen to introduce students to composition theory and at the same time give them some practical guidance in how to teach a writing course. The approach was centered on classroom discussions rather than lectures. Three techniques were used to generate those discussions: (1) students, individually and in groups, were responsible for preparing discussions and applications or exercises based on the readings; (2) each week students were required to write at least one question based on the readings; (3) students were required to select a group of readings on their own that would form the basis for their seminar papers or term essays. In course evaluations, some of the 19 students enrolled appreciated the easy classroom atmosphere that "allowed us to test our ideas and share our experiences," but others felt that they would have liked (at times) a more focused lecture-type format so as to gain a wider perspective on the issues at hand. (Contains course description and syllabus.) (TB)

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ED 370 114

Control and Chaos: Student-centered Pedagogy in the Graduate Composition Theory Course

I'd like to start with control--chaos has a way of getting out of hand, so I'll deal with that later. In the graduate course I taught, which was called "Composition Theory and Pedagogy," I chose to use a set of introductory textbooks: Tate and Corbett's *Writing Teacher's Sourcebook* (2nd ed.; New York: Oxford UP, 1988), Lindemann's *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers* (2nd ed.; New York: Oxford UP, 1987), and Tate and Lindemann's *Introduction to Composition Studies* (New York: Oxford UP, 1991). I also used a packet of readings and the Harkin and Schilb volume called *Contending With Words: Composition and Rhetoric in a Postmodern Age* (New York: MLA, 1991). My choices were driven by some guesses about the students who were likely to sign up for the course and their interests. These students had not taken a teaching assistant training course; they had little knowledge of composition as a field of inquiry; and they had taken or were in the process of taking a course on literary theory.

In response to these premises, I felt that the Lindemann and Tate and Corbett volumes would help bring pedagogical issues into our discussions. An *Introduction to Composition Studies* would help establish a framework from which to view the various readings we would encounter and ways of understanding both teaching and the teaching of writing. *Contending With Words* offered both a way to critique or problematize the framework presented in *An Introduction to Composition Studies* by offering different perspectives on, among others, what it means to teach composition, the importance of feminist perspectives on composition, and the ways in which composition is a postmodern enterprise.

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I was also trying to account for some gaps in the program at the school I taught at--there was no training program for graduate teaching assistants and no required

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course for them to take. So one of my goals was to provide an introduction to pedagogy, and I felt that the Lindemann *Rhetoric for Writing Teachers* provided a good starting point for thinking about how to teach. The Tate and Corbett collection provided a sampling of themed articles written by researchers and teachers in the field which I added to in a reading packet for the course.

So much for control. The chaos began at the first meeting of the class, where 19 people showed up for the course. I had been expecting perhaps ten, the number I had in a previous course. In retrospect, the large size of the class helped us reach our goals of decentering the class, taking the focus off of me and my pearls of wisdom, because it enabled a greater variety and volume of discussion than might have been possible otherwise. One of my goals for this class was to insist that it be a discussion-based rather than lecture-based course. The multiplicity of voices and interests in the class helped make that goal obtainable.

To keep the conversation going, I used three strategies. Students, at times individually and at times in groups, were responsible for preparing discussions and applications or exercises based on the readings. Second, each week I required students to write at least one question based on the readings. These questions were then combined on one sheet of paper and distributed to the class at the start of each meeting to form the basis of discussion. Although at times I supplied answers to the questions, many were answered by other students, and some raised yet other questions for the class. Third, I required students to select a set of readings on their own that formed the basis for their seminar papers and term essays. I know that isn't particularly radical, but requiring students to present early versions of their essays to the class contributed to a sense of their work as public and part of an ongoing conversation.

These three strategies contributed to the chaotic nature of the course. I mean chaos not in the usual meaning but in the sense of chaos as unpredictable growth. Weather patterns, for example, are chaotic (or unpredictable) but not disordered. The weather follows its own logic, as most of us know only too well, and so did this class. I would like to close with some comments from the student evaluation forms that illustrate the promises and problems inherent in the approach I used:

The classroom atmosphere, which allowed us to test our ideas and share our experiences provided an excellent learning opportunity and was stimulating and made me feel like my opinions were valued.

Though I learned a lot about pedagogical issues in composition simply from reading and listening to other students' presentations, I would have liked (at times) a more focussed lecture-type format so that I could gain a wider perspective on the issues at hand.

Presentations on assigned readings became a bit tedious after a while and class participation in all these presentations was a bit much given limits on time. Group presentations on issues rather than individual presentations on specific articles might have been more appropriate.

At times I felt that the presentations were stale, which reduced the effectiveness of . . . [the] course material.

I enjoyed the open discussions and the seminars . . . I felt that [this course] was one of the few courses I actually learned something from.

English 791: Composition Theory and Pedagogy

Professor Graves
HH 250
885-1211, 5366

Office Hours:
M, W 1:30-2:30;
Wed. 6-7

Course Description

This course introduces students to composition studies as both a field of study and a set of practices to help students develop writing abilities. Our first, and perhaps an on-going task, will be to establish some boundaries for the field of composition. To help establish these boundaries, we will read a number of historical accounts. With this background in mind, we will then proceed to identify some of the major theories of composing including cognitive, social, and epistemic theories. We will then consider how researchers develop theories about composing and about teaching composition. This work will then lead us to consider the ways in which theories of composition are imbued with political consequences as well as help us reflect on our own participation in the production of knowledge. Finally, we will consider some of the ways in which postmodern critical theory and composition theory overlap in their concern for (among other things) "the subject in discourse," developing students' abilities as cultural critics, and helping students to locate their experiences of reading and of writing in historical and social contexts.

The course will function very much as a seminar rather than as a lecture. Students (individually or in groups) will be responsible for leading the discussion of the articles under consideration for each class (a total of four times). In addition, students will be required to submit one question each class based on the readings for that meeting. These questions must be handed in at the start of class and will form the basis for discussion. To help move from consumers of knowledge to producers of knowledge, students will be required to identify an issue in composition studies, read the related research on the topic, and present some kind of synthesis or argument based upon that reading. Preliminary versions of these essays will form the basis of the seminar sessions scheduled toward the end of the meeting schedule.

Texts

Harkin, Patricia and John Schilb. *Contending With Words: Composition and Rhetoric in a Postmodern Age*. New York: MLA, 1991.

Lindemann, Erika and Gary Tate. *An Introduction to Composition Studies*. New York: Oxford UP, 1991.

Lindemann, Erika. *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*. 2nd. ed. New York: Oxford UP, 1987.

Tate, Gary and Edward P. J. Corbett. *The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook*. 2nd. ed. New York: Oxford UP, 1988.

Assignments

Weekly Discussion Questions	10
Leading discussions (4 times)	40
Attendance	10
Seminar paper	15
Essay	25

Course Policies

This course puts a premium on participation and active questioning of both theory and practice. The bulk of the grades awarded (60%) will be for attending and discussing issues during each meeting.

The essay will be due **December 14, 1992**. Students who hand in the essay after the due date will not receive a grade in the course exceeding B+. Students who fail to deliver a seminar paper may not reschedule that paper after the last course meeting, and consequently will lose the marks alloted for the seminar paper.

Tentative Meeting Schedule

Sept. 15	Organizational meeting
Sept. 22	Lunsford, ICS Lunsford, Kinko's Gage, ITC Lindemann, RWT 3-10; 33-55 Phelps, Kinko's
Sept. 29	Parker, WTS Stewart, WTS Connors, WTS Connors, ITC
Oct. 6	Berlin, WTS Lindemann, RWT 11-30; 56-73 Faigley, Kinko's Fulkerson, Kinko's
Oct. 13	Perl, WTS Emig, WTS Reither, WTS Berkenkotter, WTS Flower and Hayes, WTS
Oct. 20	Schuster, ITC Bridwell-Bowles, ITC Scott, ITC Masse, Benz, Kinko's

Oct. 27	Ede, ITC Lindemann, RWT 191-244 Murray, WTS Elbow, WTS
Nov. 3	Bartholomae, WTS Rose, WTS Ohmann, WTS Lindemann, 93-116
Nov. 10	Slevin, ICS Ohmann, Kinko's Berlin, Kinko's
Nov. 17	Clifford, CW Worsham, CW Jarratt, CW Schilb, CW
Nov. 24	Seminar presentations
Dec. 1	Seminar presenttions
Dec. 14	Essays due. No late papers accepted.